Salt of the Earth . . . Light of the World
February 13, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 119:1–8
Isaiah 58:6–9a
Matthew 5:13–20

"You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world."
Matthew 5: 13–14 (NRSV)

We are a light in the city, reflecting the inclusive love of God. Comforted and challenged by the gospel of Christ, we strive to be a welcoming, serving community. At the intersection of
faith and life, we share God's grace through worship, preaching, education and ministries of healing, reconciliation, and justice. We affirm the worth of all and nurture each individual's spiritual pilgrimage. Inspired by our heritage, we confront our future with hope and confidence in God's purpose.

Mission Statement
Fourth Presbyterian Church

> You are the salt of the earth.
> You are the light of the world.

I like to think that at this moment in time, the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago is doing its very best to reflect those words of Jesus. I like to think that this church that I love and have served for twenty-five years is described by those words. I like to think that those words of Jesus are a concise mission statement for you and me and for anyone who is compelled by him and wants to live as his man, his woman, his young adult, his child. Salt . . . light.

In the meantime, this place that I love is somewhat of a mess these days! Perhaps you have noticed: two big unsightly trailers on Delaware, a stairwell in the Garth and a huge handicap ramp leading to one of our two working entrances. The parking lot is crammed full of dump trucks, demolition equipment, and another big trailer that is serving as our Social Service Center. The receptionist desk is in a conference room. The choir is rehearsing in the library; Sunday School students are squeezed into every

nook and cranny. Thirty staff persons, our youth activities, the Center for Life and Learning have been moved off site and are temporarily relocated on the 19th floor of the 737 building, above and beside Neiman Marcus (that may be a first: The Church at Neiman Marcus), and many meetings, including the Board of Trustees and Session, are happening there.

All of this happened fairly recently. I have been on leave for the past seven weeks. When I returned last week and surveyed all this, I found Calum MacLeod, who has been in charge, and said, “Calum, I appreciate all you’ve done and how hard you’ve been working, but I cannot help but observe that in the time I’ve been away, you have pretty much trashed the place.”

It’s called Project Second Century, and building on the strong foundation of a century of mission and ministry on Michigan Avenue, it will equip this church for ministry and mission into a new century. The simple fact is that we have outgrown our facilities—not so much this magnificent worship space, but every other space, every classroom, conference room, dining room, library, community gathering space and restroom (we must not forget the restrooms). Facilities built for a congregation of 2,500 members or so are simply overwhelmed.

So we’re building a new building, a beautiful five-story, 82,000-square-foot building behind this original building. It will provide new space for our children and our older adults, for our youth, for the students who look to us for tutoring. It will provide new space for a chapel, for weddings, memorial services, concerts, and lectures and space for meetings—our own meetings and the meetings of groups that depend on us, such as AA and AlAnon. It will provide space for this community to gather—after worship and at all times of the day and night; space for coffee and doughnut holes and receptions and dinners. The new building will transform this church and enable expanded mission and programs in the future.

The building will cost $42.5 million. That’s a lot of money for a church to raise.

We are blessed to have $16 million in the bank from Project Light, $7 million in early P2C pledges, a few million in saleable assets, and a very generous challenge grant from two of our members, Ken and Anne Griffin, to double every dollar raised or pledged between now and Easter up to $5.5 million. This morning I ask every member and frequent attendee; every friend of Fourth Presbyterian Church; every person who comes to this church for programs, concerts, or lectures; every person who simply walks by every day and likes the fact that there is a church here, a robust, faithful, and growing church, to think deeply, seriously, to pray about, to get out a sharp pencil and do some figuring—to get on board and become part of this great adventure, this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a church.

Sue and I have made our commitment. It is more than we have ever given to anything because we believe so much in this. Because of the Griffin challenge, we're going to do more.

There are pledge cards in the pew racks, and on the challenge posters located around the church. You can pledge online or download a pledge form. Individual solicitation calls will be made, and you and every member will receive in the mail a letter from me and a pledge form asking for your commitment. The deadline is Easter.

So now is the time to make a pledge, a one-time gift, or a gift that is paid over three to five years. And if you are not ready this morning, if you need time—and I hope you do—to think about this and talk about it and pray about it, I'm asking you to begin to do that this morning.

> You are the salt of the earth.
> You are the light of the world.

The oldest question about religion is where and how it should be practiced.

The oldest heresy is the notion that Christianity is so holy, so sacred, so detached from real life that it cannot be practiced in the world, which, after all, is not only pragmatic and practical but sinful and fallen. So if you really want to be a Christian, you have to find some place other than this world. You have to retreat, withdraw from the world, perhaps to a community of likeminded people who agree ahead of time to follow the teachings of Jesus as fully and literally as possible. Sometimes Christians have done it literally, successfully and admirably, in cloistered monasteries and convents. Some early Christians retired to the desert to live solitary lives as hermits. And more often Christians have retreated into a private space of personal spirituality, as separate as possible from the world and all that is worldly. It's hard to pull that off if you're going to continue living in the world, so you have to come up with a definition of worldly and a list of worldly activities to avoid. Drinking and smoking have always been on the list; dancing, playing cards, going to movies, and sex (sex is so powerfully worldly that it is always on the list: don't think about it, don't do it unless you absolutely have to, and for heavens sake don't enjoy it).

William Sloane Coffin observed that something was wrong when a little boy he knew said, "Religion is all the things you're not supposed to do."

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I suppose I'm not much different from anybody else, but I became a Christian not in a single dramatic conversion experience, but over the years, as a result of a long process of teaching, learning, thinking, and observing. And over the years I had a strong suspicion, because I was told with regularity that God didn't want me to do a lot of the things I loved doing, that God wanted me to read the Bible and pray a lot and think holy thoughts and most of all avoid doing all the things on the list of worldly activities that must be sinful. Frankly, I didn't spend a lot of time worrying about it much, but I always had the sense that loving the world too much was dangerous, full of temptations of the flesh, enjoying the world and my life in it too much: music and great movies and good food and baseball even on Sundays —Sunday doubleheaders, missing church to drive to Pittsburgh with my father, little brother, and two uncles and sit in old Forbes Field to watch baseball and eat hot dogs all day long. I thought it was paradise. It was a lot better than Sunday School.

My second conversion came when I realized how wrong what I was told about loving this world is; that the world is a beautiful and good place; that God made it and everything in it and called it good, including human minds and human creativity and human bodies. My second conversion came when I concluded that living fully, enjoying this good world fully, is a way of praising and giving glory to God. I concluded that enjoying being alive in God's world is the same as praising God. When it happens—stunned by the terrible beauty of the snow and the wind and the lightning or by the incredibly complex beauty of a flower, the bright red amaryllis that stands in my living room like a dramatic punctuation mark, or a newborn's sweet face—I have come to believe it is a holy moment, experiencing the goodness of God's creation and this greatness of God. I conclude that I am experiencing and praising God when I am stunned and moved by humankind and human discipline and grace: Uchida playing Mozart on a snowy night at the Symphony Center last week with such energy and eloquence and grace; Derrick Rose launching from the free-throw line and making three separate midair moves before scoring; Rachel playing basketball in the Special Olympics; the physician who will not rest until a diagnosis is made. Any one of those can bring a tear to my eye and a deep sense of God's goodness and the goodness of life in God's world.

> Salt acts on its environment; changes, enlivens.
> Light illumines, shines in the darkness.

My second conversion came when in divinity school I heard about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German pastor and theologian, a pacifist, who decided in the 1930s that his faith in Jesus Christ required him to give up the secure and cloistered life of an academic and plunge into the world and life in the world at its most worldly and complicated and dangerous. He joined the resistance and was part of the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. When the

effort failed, the participants were rounded up, arrested, put in a military prison, and eventually executed, including Bonhoeffer. There is a small book of letters he wrote while in a Nazi prison. The one that did it for me when I first read it, and to which I have returned so many times the pages have come loose from the binding, is dated July 21, 1944, a month and a half after the Normandy invasion, and when he came to terms with the fact that he was never going to get out of prison alive. He wrote to a friend,

> During the past year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life or something like it. Later I discovered and am still discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to believe.
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> > You are the salt of the earth
> > You are the light of the world
> > Let your light shine

When people ask me about Fourth Presbyterian Church, they expect to hear about a wealthy, slightly smug, elitist church that is introverted and enjoys a little too much its elegant building and location and reputation. That has never been an accurate description of this place, but people have heard stories about rented pews and nonmembers standing outside in all kinds of weather until the members were seated in their pews, of ushers in formal wear marching lock-step down the center aisle, of the Gold Coast elite who arrived in limousines. People are genuinely surprised to hear about the Tutoring program and the 400 urban children who are welcomed into the church every week and the Social Service Center, which welcomes those who are homeless and poor. They are surprised to hear about the Sunday Night Supper that feeds hungry people every week and the Centers for Whole Health and Life and Learning and the Counseling Center and Day School, about people giving a week or so to build homes in Guatemala. People are surprised to learn about a church that understands deeply that it exists not simply for its own members but for the community, the city, the world—a church that is the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

When you join this church, when you love it and support it with your prayers, when you invest your energy and skills, when you give your money, you become part of all of that.

There are times, I am certain, when we are not at all sure we have any light to shine, when we are feeling inadequate and without energy or resources or any particular ideas or skills. I understand how we sometimes come to that conclusion, but I don’t believe it is accurate. I believe God gives each of us, deep in our hearts, light to shine somewhere, somehow, a gift, a skill

maybe as modest as our ability to love a child, a neighbor, a stranger, but it is ours, our light that Jesus asks us to shine in the world for him.

> “You are the salt of the earth,” he said.
> You are the light of the world.
> Let your light shine

Amen.